Transcript: Ed Clausen

Save Your Oakland Stories

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IMAGES: Printed photo of Ed Clausen and fire engine. Provided by Ed Clausen

INTERVIEWER (Elena Botkin-Levy)
Today is October 14th, 2023. We're recording at the Oakland Main Library for Save Your Oakland Stories. I'm Elena from Gems Oral Histories, and I'm recording with Ed Clauson today. So I want you to start out by introducing yourself, your name, your age, and when and where you were born.

ED CLAUSEN
OK. My name is Edmund Clausen. That's with a “u” and Clawson with an “e.” Tell people there are two “s” in Pickle and 1 “s” in Clawson. I was born in Oakland in 1945 at East Oakland Hospital, so I have bona fides, you know, and it's not a hospital anymore, you know, it was across from the old Montgomery Ward store on East 14th. My folks, well, we lived on 24th Avenue, a flat on 24th Ave., and in 1948 they bought a house on Fairfax Avenue in East Oakland. And that's where I grew up. I went to... walked to school every day. There was no such thing as a ride. Walked to Horace Mann Elementary on Ignacio. Walked to Hamilton Junior High on 35th and then Fremont High. After graduation I went to Merritt College OCC out on Grove St. and I, you know, I've had a great time in school while I was at OCC I, got a job at Bennett's Photo Service, which was just across the line in Berkeley on Grove Street, and the job was picking up and delivering film and photographs. And my route was in San Jose. So, you know, we… every day another fellow and I rode together to East Palo Alto, where the company had stashed another little splendid Nash Rambler. And he took off for Los Gatos, Saratoga. And I went down into San Jose to drug stores, camera shops. You know, it was in the days when you took your film in to have it developed. So we would do these routes and meet back again at the drugstore… it was behind a barber shop actually in East Palo Alto and ride back to Berkeley. He was at one point he decided that he was going to go in the Army, but he talked about the Army five days a week, Berkeley to East Palo Alto, East Palo Alto to Berkeley. And I started thinking, “Army could be interesting,” you know.

So I ended up enlisting in the Army and I took my basic training at Fort Ord and then I went to the Veterinary Food Inspection School in Chicago, IL where I learned all about, you know, vegetables and #10 cans and six way beef. My first assignment was in Korea. I went, I was assigned to the 106 Medical Detachment Team D in Daegu Korea, and we were a little compound along with the dispensary. And they had been a MASH unit during the Korean War. And as an aside I want to tell you that the movie had it dead on. Them people were crazy. They were a lot of fun. They were all, you know, young doctors and nobody was watching. At the end of my time in Korea, because it was a, quote, “hardship assignment,” you got to fill out a form and pick where you wanted to go next. And I picked anywhere on the East Coast because I just wanted to see something different. So the Army sent me to the Presidio, San Francisco. It's the Army. And then I was assigned to the inspection office at the Naval Supply Center in Oakland where, you know, we have warehouses full of food and out on the docks we shipped a lot of food stuff, mostly to Vietnam. It was that time. And I was there for about six months and then tapped to move to Eureka as a one man duty station. I had an apartment in Arcata, an Army pickup truck, and an office on the second floor of the old Post Office building at 5th and H in downtown Eureka. I inspected fish and oysters. Fish went to everybody. Oysters only went to the Navy officer's mess, of course. And twice a month I would drive to Fort Bragg to inspect the

dairy because they sold milk and things to Air Force radar installations up, you know, top of a hill someplace. And I got to know it was Borden Dairy. And I also got to know Mrs. Borden, you know, they hadn't had a cow in 20 years, but she had a freezer, you know, refrigerator that had to be inspected. So there I was.

When that was… when I completed that assignment, when I, you know, completed my enlistment I came back to Oakland, enrolled in at Laney College, and got an AA degree. The idea was to become a history teacher. And while I was going to school I worked as a bookkeeper for an insurance office on East 14th St. I had a friend who wanted to be a fireman, but he had bad eyes and he couldn't get a driver's license. Well, if you can't get a driver's license, you can't be a firefighter. So, but I, he, he was a big influence on another friend of mine. And that friend joined the Fire Department and I would look over his study material when he was at the drill tower and this is kind of interesting. And then I decided it was more interesting than being a history teacher. My apologies to all the history teachers listening, but I think I was right. But I I attended the preparatory school, prep school, at Oakland High School. A night class. Battalion Chief Bob McGue gave these classes to people who wanted to take the civil service exam. I passed the the written test, the physical agility test, the oral board and was hired as a probationary firefighter in August of 1971.

My first big fire was the Galindo Apartments. It was a six alarm fire. It was the old Galindo Hotel at 8th and Franklin I think is the best address. And that was, you know, it had been converted years ago into a, you know, single room occupancy and it was on fire. I was on duty for the BART fire. I was at station 12 and we responded on the second alarm, and that was quite an experience. I worked the Oakland Hills fire. I worked you know the Loma Prieta earthquake, you know, sort of the the big three of my career in the fire department.

Let's see, I… Proposition 13 cut budgets. They eliminated 4 engine companies and a truck company - engines 7, 9, 14, and 17, and 8 truck which was out by Eastmont. So I was a Lieutenant at the time and got rift, which is reduction in force, rift back to engineer, back to driving the fire engine. Which is a great job, maybe the best job in the fire department. But I was assigned to Engine One, which was known as the King's Men because they were at the old ice skating rink at 14th and Grove, and that's where the Fire Chief was. So the crews there were the King's Men, who also got to clean his office at night. Just one of the advantages of being a King's Man.

I was there for about a year and the personnel chief tapped me on the shoulder and said, you know, there was an opening for a Lieutenant because I was back to being an engineer, an opening for a Lieutenant at the support and services position, which was an admin position. And I said sure, you know, it was an 8 hour a day job as opposed to a 24 hour a day job. But I lived in town and you know, I thought it would be fun and it was. Like I said, it was an 18 month assignment and I was there for 16 years. Because, you know, every time you're 18 months, “well, you know, could you just… a little bit... Well, we're working on it.... How?” “OK.” So, you know, at some point you go, well you know, I'm going to retire here any day and I might as well

just stay here. So I did. But it was, it was, it was a great job. I was, I… my office was at Old 14 Engine in the Dimond district, which is a Mexican restaurant now.

The hydrant crew was there. I was a supervisor for the hydrant crew. And it was sort of the storehouse for the fire department. We had everything from, you know, 6 inch valves to towels, little linen for the Firehouse.

In that position I was liaison with the public works, muni buildings, equipment division, purchasing. Spent a lot of time debating with purchasing. [Clears throat.] Excuse me. They were, they were all good people. They were, well, yeah, purchasing. Anyway.

INTERVIEWER
Why do you laugh?

ED CLAUSEN
Well, I would, I would want something, you know, specifically, you know, headphones, for instance. And I would write a spec for that particular. “Well, you can't do that. You know, you you have to put it out there for everybody, you know, because the Ajax company makes a headphone that's almost like this one.” But I'd want the Ajax one. I want you know, and, and they were right. You know I didn't argue at that point. I just argued the point that I wanted the other. Had the same thing, I was involved in finding space for new bathrooms in firehouses when we hired women. You know originally, you know, the old boys thought “use everything, you know, the same as everybody.” Well, no. So we had to find a space and get the old hose drying rooms for instance re-plumbed and that was, you know, that was interesting. I had an argument with someone in the architectural services who insisted on having a handicapped accessible bathroom at a two-story Firehouse on the 2nd floor. And I, “this doesn't make sense, you know, first floor…” And I went to argue my point with him. And I walked into his office, he was in a wheelchair. I said, “oh, nice to meet you.” And that was the end of that.

So let's see as as a services officer, I was responsible for, for the maintenance of 27 firehouses, all the various pieces of apparatus, you know, hoses, fire engines, trucks, hose wagons, tank wagons, chiefs’ cars, whatever, you know. There was the liaison with the equipment division. You know “what's wrong with it? Can it be fixed? How long will it take to be fixed and what do we have to use in the meantime? You know, does the spare work as well as first line?” So I would… I purchased supplies for the Firehouse. You know, hose, tools, axes, miscellaneous equipment, safety supplies, work gloves, household supplies. You know, we need laundry detergent to clean those towels.

We did building repairs, fuel for the apparatus, anything that was needed. That was the job. And if it broke, I got a call. If it leaked, I got a call. If it went missing, I got a call. If it wouldn't go up or come back down, I got a call. If it needed a new handle, I got a call. If it stopped going around, I got a call. So you could say I found my calling. Sorry, but you know I worked one time or another with everyone in the Fire Department and, it was just, it was great.

During this time I was there, I was also the editor of the Fire News, which was the newsletter for Local 55, the firefighters union in the IAFF. I did that for years. And I was the treasurer, secretary-treasurer of the Firefighters Welfare Association, which was kind of an insurance thing if you were injured off the job and couldn't go to work. It was before we accumulated sick leave, so it was… it helped there. I did that for 20 plus years.

I was a member of the Police and Fire Coordinating Council for a while.

I edited and produced a yearbook for the fire department in 1983. I always hesitate to call it a yearbook because it was the third one in, you know, the 100 year history. So it's not quite a year, but...

In my, maybe my finest hour was getting the Fire Department logo painted on the side of the drill tower. I don't know if you've driven down the Nimitz Freeway and seen that building standing there with the fire department logo on it. It's at the end of Victory Court and very visible from fire, from the freeway. And I just decided it pays to advertise. So it took a while to get it painted because the drill tower was at the bottom of the list of buildings to be painted because nobody worked in it. So I finally got that painted. I got enough money to get the sign made and and it, when they were painting it I walked up and asked the painter about how long it would last. And he said, “oh, I don't know, 5-10 years maybe.” And it's been there now for 25 years at least. So I have to smile every time I drive past it.

The… it may sound kind of corny, but I think I made a contribution to the safety and the welfare of the people of Oakland. And I retired on Groundhog Day 2020. 2002, rather. 30 years and six months, and I was fresh faced no longer.

I have… beyond my fire department time, my hobby is collecting Oakland memorabilia. I collect photographs. I have a too-large collection of glass plate negatives of Oakland school pictures, programs, invoices, invitations to balls and marches, and city directories, and letterhead, stationery, and other miscellaneous paper and ephemera. I have a collection of - the last time I counted it was about 8500 - postcards of Oakland, and that happened by accident. I found three in a barrel at an antique shop and thought, oh look, you know for 30 cents I had a collection. And then I had 100 postcards and I thought, that has to be it. You know, why would there be more than 100 postcards? It's 85 and counting… 8500 and counting. But they're… it's a great, a great history of of Oakland, you know, because postcards you'll have images that you don't find anywhere else. So, and especially the real photo cards of, you know, Aunt Telly sitting on the porch, you know, with Ajax the dog and, you know, so that's… that's fun.

I am currently the treasurer for the San Francisco Bay Area Postcard club. You didn't know there was one, but there we meet every 4th Saturday of every month at Fort Mason in San Francisco, so stop by.

I served on the board of the old Dunsmuir House and Gardens when they first started out. I was 18 years on the board. I'm currently on the board of the Alameda County Historical Society and I

participated, well, I'm a member, of course, in the Oakland, Oakland History Friends. Got to applaud that. I participated for a time with the Friends of Joaquin Miller Park where we were working to restore Joaquin Miller Abbey. And I was on, I was on the measure DD Oversight committee until the pandemic, when everything went to Zoom and I don't have a camera on my computer, so God bless them, I haven't seen them since. But it's all been interesting and fun. You know, Oakland is my home, so I try to do something for the city.

INTERVIEWER
Amazing what a history you have here.

ED CLAUSEN
And that's just the interesting part.

INTERVIEWER
You brought this fabulous photo with you and I'm wondering if you can describe this picture and say a little bit what's happening here.

ED CLAUSEN
Well, what's happening here is that fresh faced kid I'm at Engine, that's a picture of engine 18 at 50th and Bancroft. It was a… I think it was a 1950 coast. It was built in Martinez and it was sort of state-of-the-art at the time. I'm, there I am leaning against the front fender at 50th and Bancroft and… I've always loved the story, I went to grammar school at Horace Mann. And in the second grade we… must have been fire prevention week because we took a little tour down to the Firehouse, local fire station. And that fire engine was there when I was there in the second grade and it was still there when I was assigned to 18 Engine. So it must have worked. They got their money's worth out of that one. But that was good. It was a B-shifted 18 engine, it was a good crew, and unfortunately when the… it was a 5 man crew and then we reduced to four man. And I was on the engineer's list so they begged me goodbye. But you know I still always considered it home base.

INTERVIEWER
You said driving was one of your favorite jobs. I wonder as, when you started as a firefighter and then when you ended, how you saw the city and specifically your neighborhood change.

ED CLAUSEN
Yeah, the, of course, if I want to talk about fire engines or fire equipment first, they just kept getting bigger. You know this, this was the era of, still, of open cabs and riding on the tail board. And riding on the tail board was fun, by the way.

INTERVIEWER
Can you describe that?

ED CLAUSEN

Oh yeah. It's like every, well, I was going to say every Three Stooges movie, but you know, you just hung on the back on a bar across the back facing, you know, front and you could see what was going on. You know, for safety reasons they became more enclosed, and jump seats, and and now you ride inside. Oakland had the idea that fire engines, fire apparatus, had to be open cabs. So when they would buy… we had hose wagons back then still, with two piece engine companies, which is going to throwback to the days of steamers. But you know… where was I going with this? The hose wagons. They would buy commercial chassis, Ford chassis, and cut the roof off so the officer could stand up and point, you know. It was always fun in the rain. I can remember driving 1 Engine, great big van pelt. Our department parade rig is one of those. We had two van pelts, and when they were turned out I convinced the Fire Chief to keep that one as a parade rig and we hid it aside and other people got it stored and cleaned up and fixed. And so I'm, you know, happy to see that one come around.

But the neighborhoods, well like 18 Engine 50th and Bancroft, you know, back in the day the bar across the street, the one that… the bar that made it into Ripley's Believe it or Not as taking up an entire city block. Well, the city block is about the size of this table but that's beside the point. And, you know, so you had the little activity in the neighborhood. Now I think somebody lives in the building, but you know, there was a Richfield oil station across the street too and beyond that, the Melrose Branch Library. Melrose is there. It's been, you know, retrofitted and earthquake ready. The gas station is, you know, full of junk cars, I think. But you know, I grew up in the Fairfax neighborhood. Foothill and Fairfax, you know, that's where you went to the bakery or the, you know, the Radio TV repair shop had an electric train in the window and a little flyer screen and if you put your hand on the screen, the train went around. I could stand there for hours. “Come along, come along.” But, you know, the Fairfax Theatre was there. They had kind of a, well, I was going to say seedy restaurant bar with stalactites hanging from the ceiling. That was the decor, you know. So that was always fun, you know. I couldn't stay in there, but I got to look in there.

INTERVIEWER
Do you remember what it was called?

ED CLAUSEN
No, unfortunately I don't. It was, it was next to the liquor store. Between the liquor store and the bank. Bank of America was there, and then Sprouse-Reitz, and beyond that a half a block was Fairfax Variety. And A Bit of Ireland Bakery was on the other side, and that was… the Bit of Ireland Bakery, you know, for what this story's worth if you bought bread, they sliced it. There was always one thick slice because the slicer… that blade broke during the war and they couldn't get a replacement. They never bothered to fix it. You know, it baked great French toast.

But I was at Horace Mann. I was on the Traffic Squad. Boy, this is really bubbling up, isn't it? So on the Traffic Squad, I was a substitute sign Slinger.

INTERVIEWER
What does that mean?

ED CLAUSEN
Well, that means if the regular sign slinger couldn't be there, then I filled in. And we had, you know, sign slingers at Ignacio and Congress and then at Foothill and Congress. And I got fired as a substitute sign slinger because the regular sign slinger was on the football team. So he was never there. He was off. So I said, “well, you know, why don't I become the sign slinger and let Philip become the substitute?” “Well, no, we can't do that.” So I guess I wasn't fired. I just guess I quit.

That doesn't make sense. I, you know, I'm always there and he isn’t. Oh well. So, pig headed little kid.

INTERVIEWER
What was your responsibility supposed to be as sign slinger?

ED CLAUSEN
You stood on the corner and when the captain blew the whistle, you slung the sign out in the traffic lane so the kids could cross. And you know now of course I'm sure that at Foothill, at least, they have an adult who does this. But, you know, you just carried you a little sign, you know, order arms sort of thing, and walk down. And one whistle was out, two whistles were back. And you stood there, you know, parade rest and with your little red jacket and your little yellow cap on. So. But, Philip didn't want to do it, so I wasn't going to do it either.

INTERVIEWER
I like your decision.

ED CLAUSEN
Yeah. “Oh, doesn't make sense. I'll go home.” Yeah.

INTERVIEWER
And that was when you were in elementary school?

ED CLAUSEN
In elementary school, Yeah. Now in junior high school at Hamilton, which… it was Hamilton Junior High then. Then it became Calvin Simmons Middle School. I'm not sure what it is now, but it was exactly one mile from my doorstep to 35th and Galindo. And I like to tell people it truly was uphill both ways. Because, you know, you walk down to High Street and then back up and you know to 38th and down to Harrington and then up Galindo to 35th. And coming home was up Galindo to Harrington. So you know, the only thing missing is the snow. Because you know you get a little more sympathy if you walk both ways uphill in the snow. But that was, that was, you know, I enjoyed junior high school. I was, I was on the Welfares, which was, you know, sort of, you know, they were, they were the hall monitors. You know, you look back, you think it's snippy little kids, but you know, “you're walking the wrong way.” But there I was. And then, you know, went to Fremont High, which was, you know, only uphill one way. But I pretty much

enjoyed school. You know, I wasn't necessarily the pride of the regiment when it came to handing out report cards, but I was a good solid B student and, you know, got along, again, got along with everybody, enjoyed everybody's company, and it was fun. So far it's been a great life.

INTERVIEWER
And so rooted in Oakland. And it's so wonderful to hear your stories about this place and it sounds like you've really had a life of service, from sign slinging to firefighter.

ED CLAUSEN
Yeah. I hadn't really thought of it that way, but I guess you're right. Yeah. You can always… you know, I'm Missus Clausen's little boy Edmund. You always try to help where you can. And so it's been, you know, the various groups and organizations and clubs and committees and things just, you know, you, you, it's home, like I say. So you try to make it as good as you can.

INTERVIEWER
Yeah. Well, this is only a snapshot of your life. But I wonder if in this recording session, it feels like there's anything missing in terms of stories or aspects of your life for the city.

ED CLAUSEN
Oh wow. Well, you know, there's stories with Dunsmuir House when we were… The city bought the property and was going to use it as a Conference Center, and they had one conference… Mayor Houlihan and Wayne Thompson was the City Manager, and they had this great idea. But then things kind of went south for both of them and so did the project, and the property just sat empty for years. And a group of do-gooder Garden Club people got together and tried to do something with it. And I read about it in the paper and I had wandered in there, I think in 1962, and looked around. And so I saw this notice in the paper that they were going to have a meeting and form an organization, and they're going to meet at the Garden Center at Lakeside Park. And I thought, well, show up. You know, you've always thought it's too bad something isn't being done. Something was being done. So, see what you can do. And I went to that meeting. The Ebell Room was full and there were like three people there under 102.

I looked around, I thought, “my God, these people are old.” Well, guess what? If you'll wait long enough. Yeah. But, I was on the board there. I was president a couple of different terms. I have cleaned Dunsmuir House. You know the two floors of Dunsmuir House by myself when nobody else showed up, You know, they had other people that did it, and sometimes it had to be done and there was nobody there. So we get the vacuum cleaner out. And, you know, before the roof was fixed, we had sheets of Visqueen on the third floor to collect the water and it emptied into buckets and wash tubs and vases and whatever. And on rainy nights, I would lay in bed and listen to the rain and think to myself, “no, no.” And then I would get up and drive out to Dunsmuir House and walk up to the third floor, open the window and empty all those buckets and pans and whatnot. Because I just, I knew I could, you know, save the ceiling on the 2nd floor. So you just do it. And it got to the point that I would turn the alarm off on the back porch, walk into the kitchen, and walk up to the third floor and never turn on a light. Just knew where everything was.

I have… I took a lot of pictures in and around Dunsmuir House over the years. And the History Center has a lot of slides of that but I… the problem is I have 110 slides, which are the little tiny ones, because that was, you know, the wave of the future when the Hunt brothers cornered the silver market and, you know, everything went south with photography. So this was, when I think back at it now, there were probably, you know, two people in the whole country who bought into this 110 slide idea. You know me and, and somebody in Topeka, KS. But I have all those slides, you know, they should be scanned sometime because nobody has projectors for those little slides. You know, I do, but you know I'm taking it to the grave. There's old fire pictures and personal family pictures things, but we'll have to work on that.

With the Abbey and Joaquin Miller Park. The Alameda County Historical Society for some reason got the idea that they were responsible for restoring it. And it had to have been, you know, a gentlemen's agreement somewhere along the line and “we'll take care of that and we'll do that for you.” Well, you know those people move on. And I came on the board and was handed a file, you know, 2 inch file with all this information about the Abbey. And, you know, and talk of of Joaquin's diamond ring. You know Juanita, I don't know Joaquin, I can't remember now… if Joaquin got the ring from the Queen of England or if Juanita did. But it turned out to be paste, so we didn't have to worry about that. But the, you know, the… you drive by the Abbey and it just sits there and it, you know. And again I thought something should be done with it. You know, either fix it up or get rid of it. But so, you know, Dale Risden and other people from friends of Joaquin Miller Park, they did the lion's share of the work to get it… I got it painted once. I gave a gift to the painting foreman for the city and I said “here, when you guys are, you know, a little slack work if they could go up and repaint that building because it's pretty tacky.” And so it got painted, but it's since been redone and there are plaques up now in the park. Historical Society sponsored one of the plaques, and Joaquin Miller… At some point in this renovation, I got a call from a reporter for the Chronicle, was doing a story on it. And I made the mistake, you know, you talk for 20 minutes, half an hour, and they pull one little thing out of the conversation. And what they pulled out was the part where I said that Joaquin Miller was a lousy poet and a fraud, but he was ours.

Well, the Joaquin Miller Society of, you know, Greater Oregon, you know, rose up in arms. “What do you mean?” One man's opinion. So, but, he was an interesting character. His… I would like to have met his horse. Because Joaquin lived there, you know, that was country. And he did his shopping in Dimond. So he would get in the buggy and go down, you know, what became Lincoln Avenue, do his shopping, get a snoot full, get back in the buggy, and the horse took him off. So, you know, it's the little things, you know. That's not on the marquee, but it's there, it's better than what's on the marquee.

INTERVIEWER
Amazing.

ED CLAUSEN

Yeah, that's, you know, I mean, I could Babble on probably for a long time with, you know, bits and pieces, but, you know, before the city tows my car…
INTERVIEWER
Yeah.

ED CLAUSEN
I probably should wrap this up and just say thank you.

INTERVIEWER
Thank you. Thank you for sharing your stories and some of your legacy.

ED CLAUSEN
OK, You're quite welcome. It's been fun. It's been fun. I would say “let's do it again,” but I have to wait ‘til the next life.

INTERVIEWER
All right, I'll stop us for now,

ED CLAUSEN
OK